The Weather Outside

—"Something lingers in my veins

That's telling me I'm not the same."

Palaye Royale – Black Sheep

Est sent a message to Hong.

Est: I'm here.

The message was read within seconds. No reply.

Est looked at his phone. Looked at the venue. Looked at the queue that he was presumably supposed to join—the line of people waiting to enter a party that he was not sure he belonged at, the line stretching from the door to the sidewalk, the people in the line dressed in versions of Valentine's aesthetics that ranged from earnest to ironic to something in between.

He waited. The crowd moved around him—people arriving, people entering, the steady, processional flow of bodies toward the doors, the movement creating a current that he stood outside of, observing.

He felt the specific, learned, deeply familiar sensation of being alone in a crowd—the sensation that he had known since Maryland, since the international school where everyone had friends and he had scholarships, since every party and every event and every gathering where he had stood at the edge and watched other people connect while he cataloged the ways in which connection happened and tried to reverse-engineer the formula and failed.

"P'Est!"

The voice came from behind him—high, bright, musical, cutting through the ambient noise of the street like a bell through fog.

He turned.

Lego was there.

Lego in person was different from Lego in memory. The memory of Lego from the warehouse was bright—the giggle, the warmth, the strawberry scent, the impression of color and movement and the specific, impossible-to-resist energy of a person who filled spaces by entering them. But the memory was also blurred, softened by the alcohol and the late hour and the atmosphere of the night, the edges rounded, the details lost to the general impression of brightness.

Lego in person was sharp. The makeup was flawless. Eyes enormous—made larger by the light-colored contact lenses, the pupils surrounded by gold-silver irises that

caught every light source and amplified it. Eye makeup elaborate—dark and detailed, the kind of work that required skill and patience and a steady hand, the kind of work that was art before it was cosmetics. The face was porcelain-pale, the foundation applied to create smoothness rather than mask texture, the skin luminous under the streetlights.

The hair was styled in two half-ponytails—the upper half gathered into twin buns positioned high on his head, the lower half left loose, the strands framing the face like a black curtain. Red ribbons tied the ponytails—not small, functional ribbons but long, decorative streamers that trailed down past his shoulders, the ribbons moving with every shift of his head, the movement hypnotic, the ribbons behaving like living things.

The outfit was—committed. An oversized black Peter Pan collar sweater that fell below the thighs, the collar dramatic, white, the fabric soft and thick, the sweater functioning as both garment and statement. Platform boots underneath—the height-adding, attention-demanding footwear that Lego seemed to live in, the boots tonight decorated with small silver hearts that caught the light. In his long-nailed hands—the nails painted tonight, dark red with intricate designs, tiny hearts and arrows—he held a phone. Hong's phone, Est would realize later. But for now, just a phone.

"P'Est, good evening!" Lego approached quickly, the platform boots clicking against the pavement with the rhythmic, purposeful sound of a small army advancing. "P'Hong left his phone with me and went to the bar. That's why I'm here."

"He left his phone?" Est's voice carried surprise—genuine surprise, because leaving your phone in 2026 felt like leaving a limb, the device so integrated into daily function that its absence was disorienting.

"He said he needed both hands for the drinks." Lego's smile was bright—the full-face, nothing-held-back smile that transformed his features from beautiful to radiant. "He's very dedicated to his bartender duties. He takes beverage transportation seriously."

Lego lifted one sleeve of the Peter Pan collar sweater, revealing several red bracelets layered on his wrist. Underneath them, Est glimpsed lace bracelets—delicate, probably handmade, the kind of detail that only someone looking closely would notice. Lego slipped one of the red bracelets off and held it out.

"Here," he said. "With the bracelet, you can come and go easily. No queue. No questions."

Est took the bracelet. It was fabric—soft, well-made, woven rather than printed, the kind of event wristband that was designed to look good rather than just functional. He slipped it over his hand, adjusting it on his wrist.

The red sat against his skin—against the silver watch and the reddish-brown jacket sleeve, the color warm, alive, the small, woven band feeling less like an access pass and more like an invitation that had been accepted, a threshold that had been crossed, a door that had opened and that he was, despite every instinct that told him to stay outside, choosing to walk through.

Lego watched him put it on. The enormous eyes tracked the movement—the bracelet sliding over the hand, the wrist adjusting, the red settling into place against the jacket. Lego's expression was—pleased. Approving. The look of a person who had given a gift and was watching it be received.

"It looks good on you, P'Est." Lego said.

"Thank you."

Lego tilted his head—the specific, curious, bird-like tilt that Est was beginning to recognize as a precursor to Lego's directness, the physical warning sign that a question was coming and the question would be honest and possibly invasive and definitely asked without apology.

"P'Est, can I hold your hand?"

The question was—unexpected. Not unwelcome. Lego asked. Directly. Without embarrassment. And Est felt something loosen in his chest. The specific, involuntary, bodily response to being asked—to being given the choice, to having the consent requested rather than assumed, to being treated as a person whose boundaries mattered rather than a surface whose accessibility was a professional requirement. The same loosening he had felt in the dark apartment, in the white sheets, when a different person had asked a different question: Is everything alright? Are you too drunk?

The asking was the kindness. The asking was the difference between contact and connection, between touch and violation, between the industry's hands on his body and the boy's hands asking permission first.

"Yes," Est said. His voice was steady—steadier than he felt, but the steadiness was a choice, the performance of calm in service of the truth underneath. "You can."

Lego's smile widened—The hand was small—smaller than Est's, the fingers delicate despite the long nails, the grip firm without being tight. The grip of a person who held hands the way they held silks: with attention, with purpose, with the understanding that the holding was both functional and meaningful. Lego's hand in his felt—warm. Real. The specific, undeniable physicality of another person's presence, the heat transfer between palms, the slight pressure of fingers against knuckles.

"Come on," Lego said, and pulled him gently toward the door. "Everyone's waiting."

They entered the venue.

Inside was—overwhelming.

Not unpleasantly—not the suffocating overwhelm of the gala Est had attended in his previous life, not the commercial, calibrated, designed-to-impress overwhelm of a space that had been created to make people feel small so the brand could feel large. This overwhelm was warm. Chaotic. The overwhelm of a place that was full of people who wanted to be there, who had chosen to be there, who were producing the specific, organic, unreproducible energy that happened when a crowd was genuine rather than transactional.

Inside, the Valentine's assault was total. Red and pink lights bathed everything in a romantic glow that was probably supposed to be flattering and was, in reality, slightly disorienting—the kind of lighting that made everyone look either angelic or feverish depending on their proximity to the nearest fixture. Black and white curtains framed the space, the contrast dramatic, the aesthetic committed. Paper hearts glued to surfaces and hanging from the ceiling like a swarm of frozen emotions. Streamers everywhere—pink, red, white, the streamers crossing the ceiling in chaotic patterns that suggested someone had been given unlimited crepe paper and zero supervision.

Heart-shaped inflatables floated near the bar—bobbing gently in the air currents created by the crowd's movement, the inflatables occasionally bonking people on the head, the bonking accepted as part of the experience. Balloons in clusters. Velvet armchairs scattered around the edges—the kind of furniture that seemed like the worst possible choice for a venue where people were actively drinking and dancing, but that looked, Est had to admit, very good in photographs.

The ceiling was high—higher from the inside than it had appeared from outside, the architectural trick of a space designed to feel grander than its footprint suggested. A large stage dominated one end of the room, currently empty but clearly prepared for performance—the lighting rigs visible, the equipment stationed, the stage waiting like an altar for whatever ritual would be performed upon it. A bar stretched along the other side of the venue—a long, well-staffed operation with bartenders in costume. Wings. Heart-shaped accessories. The commitment to Valentine's aesthetics was complete.

Restrooms somewhere in the back, indicated by glowing signs. And a second floor—accessible by stairs, the upper level visible from the ground floor, filled with chairs and tables, some already occupied by groups of people drinking together, the second floor providing a vantage point, a place to observe rather than participate, a space for the people who preferred periphery to center.

The DJ was playing something bass-heavy—not overwhelming, not the ear-splitting volume of a club, but present, the bass moving through the floor and into the bodies

standing on it, the music felt as much as heard. The crowd was dense—bodies moving, drinks being passed, conversations happening at volumes that required leaning in, the specific, low-level chaos of a party that was already in full swing, that had started before Est arrived and would continue after he left, that existed independently of his presence and would not pause to acknowledge it.

The bartenders and the DJ were in theme. Wings attached to backs. Red fabric wrapped around arms. Heart-shaped accessories pinned to shirts. The staff had committed to the aesthetic with the professionalism of people who understood that a themed party required total commitment, that half-measures destroyed the illusion, that the magic only worked if everyone agreed to believe in it.

At least, Est thought, looking down at his reddish-brown jacket and his silver rings, my jacket matches.

Lego moved through the crowd with ease—not forcing, not pushing, but flowing, the small body navigating the larger bodies with the practiced skill of a person who had spent years learning to move through spaces that were not designed for him. His hand remained in Est's—the grip constant, the guidance clear, the physical connection serving as both anchor and map.

People recognized him. Of course they did. Lego's social media presence was significant—the videos, the performances, the aesthetic that was both unique and shareable, the combination of beauty and skill and brightness that made him the kind of person who collected followers the way other people collected stamps.

People waved. People called out greetings—"Lego!" "Looking amazing!" "Can't wait for the show!"—the greetings affectionate, familiar, the greetings of a community that knew him and claimed him as one of their own. Lego returned the greetings with quick smiles and brief acknowledgments, the social navigation of a person who knew everyone and was known by everyone but who had a destination and was not stopping until he reached it.

"The stage is amazing," Lego said over his shoulder, raising his voice above the music but not shouting, the volume calibrated. "Wait until you see the aerial rig."

They climbed the stairs to the second floor. The second floor was quieter. Not quiet—the music still reached here, the bass still vibrated through the floor, the venue's sound system designed to ensure that no space was truly silent—but quieter. The crowd was thinner. The conversations were audible. The tables were spaced far enough apart to provide something like privacy, the kind of semi-private space that allowed groups to exist within the larger event without being absorbed by it.

Lego led him to a table near the railing—a spot with a clear view of the stage below, a vantage point that said this is where the people who matter sit, the positioning deliberate, chosen, the kind of spot that was reserved rather than claimed.

Nut and Tui were already there.

Nut looked up first.

The serious face. The muscular build—visible even in the casual clothes, the body of a person who lifted weights not for aesthetics but for function, for the specific, practical purpose of being strong enough to do the things that strength required. The specific, assessing attention that Nut brought to everything—not judgment, not evaluation, but observation, the looking of a person who noticed details and filed them and used them later when the details mattered.

He was wearing a gray t-shirt under an open green sweatshirt, the fabric worn and comfortable, the kind of clothing that had been washed many times and had achieved the specific softness that only repeated laundering could produce. Gray jeans, similarly worn. A black belt. The whole composition said: I am here to support Lego. The fashion is optional.

"Est." Nut's voice was warm. "You made it."

"I said I would," Est replied.

"People say a lot of things." Nut's smile was small but genuine. "It's good that you meant it."

Tui was beside him—the glasses on tonight, the black button-down shirt that looked expensive, that fit well, that suggested Tui had dressed up for this event in a way that he didn't dress up for most events. The shirt was slightly unbuttoned at the collar, revealing a hint of his tanned chest, the skin warm under the venue's lights. His hair was styled—not dramatically, but intentionally, the brown strands arranged rather than left to chance. Black pants and a black belt completed an outfit that was significantly more polished than the SOLD OUT t-shirt Est had seen him wear before. His camera was on the table beside him—the Nikon, scarred, faithful, the strap worn smooth by years of use, the camera resting on the surface like a pet that had been told to stay.

"P'Est," Tui said. The gravelly voice, the steady gaze—the eyes that saw past surfaces, the photographer's eyes, the eyes that looked for the thing underneath the thing. "Good to see you."

"You too," Est said, and meant it.

They greeted him as if they had known him longer than they had—the warmth immediate, the welcome genuine, the inclusion performed without ceremony or hesitation, as if Est's presence at this table was not a surprise but an expectation that had finally been met.

"Sit down," Tui said, pulling out the chair beside him with one hand, the gesture

casual, the invitation clear. "The drinks are coming."

"P'Hong is at the bar," Lego said, sliding into a chair on Est's other side, the platform boots hovering off the ground, the chair too high for his feet to reach the floor, the feet swinging slightly in the air like a child's. "He's been there for twenty minutes. I think he's having a philosophical conversation with the bartender about the proper ratio of vermouth to gin."

"That sounds like Hong," Nut observed.

"It is Hong," Lego said, his voice carrying the specific, affectionate exasperation of a person discussing a friend whose behavior was predictable and annoying and beloved. "P'Hong has opinions about everything. Especially things that involve alcohol."

As if summoned by his name—as if the speaking of his name had conjured him from the crowd the way saying a ghost's name three times summoned it from the mirror—Hong emerged from the stairs. He was climbing toward them with a tray balanced on one hand—the tray large, laden with glasses, the balancing act requiring attention, the kind of attention that made Hong's face serious, focused, the sarcasm temporarily suspended in service of not spilling drinks on strangers.

His gray hair caught the red and pink lights as he moved—the color shifting with each step, silver becoming rose, rose becoming silver, the pigment interacting with the venue's illumination in ways that were probably not intentional but were undeniably striking, the gray hair functioning as a prism for the Valentine's palette.

Hong was wearing a gray sleeveless shirt that revealed his arms—the toned, lean arms of a person whose body was an instrument rather than an ornament, A black star was printed on the center of the shirt—simple, graphic, the kind of design that was either very expensive or very cheap and impossible to tell which. Wide-legged jeans with decorative zippers running down the sides, the zippers nonfunctional but aesthetic, the jeans loose, comfortable, the opposite of the tight, body-conforming pants that the industry preferred.

He looked—good. Not in the polished, product-ready way that Est looked good when he was working, but in the genuine dressed for themselves rather than for cameras.

"Hey," Hong said, arriving at the table, setting the tray down with the care of a person who had carried fragile things and knew the cost of dropping them. His smile widened when he saw Est sitting with the others, the flat expression breaking into something warmer. "Look who actually showed up."

"You told me to," Est said.

"I tell people to do a lot of things. They rarely listen."

"Maybe your delivery needs work."

"My delivery is perfect. It's the audience that's defective."

"No turtleneck," Hong observed, his eyes moving over Est's outfit with the quick, assessing scan of a person who noticed details. "I'm impressed. I thought you'd bring a backup turtleneck in your jacket pocket just in case."

"My pockets are full," Est said.

"With what?"

"Anxiety."

Hong laughed—the short, surprised, involuntary laugh that was becoming familiar, the laugh that said you're funnier than I expected you to be. "At least you're honest about it."

The tray held an assortment of drinks: sugar-free sodas in sleek cans, beer in bottles with condensation beading on the glass, Thai Sabai cocktails in pink glasses that matched the venue's aesthetic, the pink liquid glowing under the lights like something radioactive or magical or both. And in the center of the tray, unmistakable even among the colorful chaos: a dirty martini. Clear liquid. Three olives on a pick. The glass slightly frosted from the cold, the condensation beginning to form on the outside, the drink exactly as Est had ordered it a week ago at a different party in a different venue in what felt like a different life.

"The martini is for you," Hong said, sliding it toward Est across the table, the glass leaving a small wet trail on the wood. "I remembered."

Est looked at the drink—at the olives, at the clear liquid, at the evidence that Hong had remembered a detail from a single conversation a week ago, that Hong had translated that memory into action, that Hong had stood at a bar for twenty minutes arguing with a bartender about vermouth ratios because Est had once mentioned that he liked his martinis dirty. The gesture was—small. The gesture was enormous.

"Thank you," Est said. His voice came out quieter than he intended, the gratitude larger than the volume could contain.

"Don't thank me," Hong said, dropping into the chair beside Tui with the casual, boneless grace of a person whose body was comfortable in chairs the way other people's bodies were comfortable in beds. "It cost me a twenty-minute conversation about vermouth philosophy. The bartender looked at me like I'd ordered in a foreign language. Dirty martinis aren't exactly standard at a Valentine's party."

"But you convinced them," Tui said.

"I'm very persuasive."

"You're very stubborn."

"Same thing."

Hong picked up one of the beers from the tray—a local brand, the label simple, the bottle sweating. He twisted the cap off with his hand, no bottle opener required, the casual demonstration of a skill learned from years of opening beers at parties. "The bartender and I have agreed to disagree about the proper construction of a martini. It's very diplomatic of us."

"You're not diplomatic," Tui said, his voice warm, the warmth of a person who was contradicting a friend with affection rather than malice.

"I'm occasionally diplomatic," Hong corrected. "When the situation requires it. Which is almost never."

They drank. They talked. The talking was—easy. Easier than Est expected, easier than his anxiety had predicted, easier than the internet's version of him—the cold, robotic, mannequin Prince—should have been capable of. The table settled into conversation the way water settled into a container: naturally, without force, finding the shape of the space and filling it.

Nut asked Est about the campaign—about the Valentine's perfume shoot, about the photos that had dropped that morning, about the "Prince and Rebel" narrative that the internet had constructed from pixels and shipping wars and the bottomless need for stories about people who existed as characters rather than humans.

Est answered carefully—acknowledging the attention without confirming the narrative, discussing the professional aspects (the lighting, the creative direction, the specific positioning that the photographer had chosen) without revealing the personal toll (the comments, the comparisons to Kai, the word robot repeated until it stopped being an insult and started being a diagnosis he half-believed).

Tui talked about the photography he was planning for tonight—for Lego's performance, for the aerial work that would happen in an hour, for the specific, technical considerations of capturing movement in low light, in red and pink lighting that would affect every color in the frame, that would require compensating, adjusting, thinking three steps ahead of the shutter.

"The pink is going to murder my white balance," Tui said, his hand resting on his camera, the gesture protective, the way a person rested their hand on a sleeping dog. "But that's fine. I'll shoot RAW and fix it in post."

"You could just embrace the pink," Lego suggested, his platform boots swinging in the air, the movement hypnotic, rhythmic.

"I could. But I won't. Pink is your color, Sweetheart. Not mine."

"Pink is everyone's color if they're brave enough."

Hong interjected with commentary—sarcastic, sharp, but warm underneath, the specific tone that Est was learning to read as affection rather than aggression, as the love language of a person who had been told he was too much and had responded by being more and who now communicated care through contradiction.

"They do this every time," Hong said, leaning toward Est, his voice pitched low, conspiratorial, the volume suggesting that what he was saying was for Est specifically rather than the table generally. "Nut insults Tui's photography. Tui defends his artistic vision. Lego mediates. Nobody wins. It's our version of couples therapy."

"We're not a couple," Nut and Tui said simultaneously—the synchronicity unplanned, the timing perfect, the delivery flat.

Hong grinned. "Interesting that you both felt the need to clarify that at exactly the same time. Very convincing. I'm completely persuaded."

Lego giggled—the bright, musical sound that Est remembered from the warehouse, the sound that had penetrated even his alcohol haze and lodged in his memory as something worth keeping, as a frequency that was rare and precious and worth protecting.

And through it all—through the drinking and the talking and the laughing and the easy, comfortable, utterly unexpected warmth of sitting at a table with people who seemed to genuinely enjoy each other's company—Est was thinking.

Thinking about the boy.

Thinking about the unfinished tattoo that his fingers had traced in the dark—the lines that were present and the lines that were absent, the design that was incomplete, the story that was still being written on skin that was warm and alive beneath his touch.

Thinking about the hands that had asked permission. The voice that had said is everything alright? and meant it, that had paused the momentum and the heat and the charged, electric closeness of two bodies in a dark room because the answer to the question mattered more than the continuation.

He looked at the people at the table—carefully, subtly, the observation disguised as casual attention, the looking hidden inside the not-looking.

He looked at Nut. The serious face. The muscular arms. The green sweatshirt covering his torso, covering whatever might be underneath—skin or ink, blank canvas or marked territory, the mystery concealed by fabric.

He looked at Tui. The button-down shirt, slightly unbuttoned. The tanned skin visible at the collar. The sleeves rolled to the elbows, revealing forearms but nothing higher, the back completely hidden, the tattoo—if there was a tattoo—inaccessible to observation.

Neither of them showed any particular recognition of him beyond the normal recognition of a person they'd met once before at a party. They treated him like a new acquaintance, like a friend-of-a-friend, like someone they were getting to know rather than someone they had already known intimately.

Their clothes revealed nothing. Nut's sweatshirt covered his back. Tui's button-down concealed whatever was underneath. Neither showed any visible tattoos—but that meant nothing. The tattoo Est remembered had been on the back. The back was hidden. The back was always hidden unless you deliberately revealed it, unless you turned around and lifted your shirt and said look, here is the thing I carry.

Est touched his glass. Took a sip of the martini—the taste familiar, honest, the olives and the gin and the specific, uncompromising clarity of a cocktail that did not pretend to be anything other than what it was. Tried to focus on the conversation rather than the investigation that was happening in parallel, the detective work that his brain was conducting without permission, the process of elimination that was running in the background like a program he couldn't close.

But the investigation continued.

Hong was—not the one. Est was almost certain. Hong had a tattoo—the gray peony on his waist, running down toward his hip, the delicate flower inked in grayscale on skin that the cameras loved and that the internet obsessed over. The person in his bed had not had a tattoo there. The person had been unmarked in that area—Est was sure of it, the memory fragmentary but specific, the body he'd touched carrying ink in one place (the back) but not in others.

Lego was—also not the one. The height was wrong. Lego was significantly shorter than Est—five-six even with the platform boots that added three inches, even with the hair styled to add volume. The person in Est's bed had been close to his own height. The kiss had been achieved without significant height adjustment, without the bending or lifting that Lego's frame would have required. The geometry didn't work. The bodies didn't match.

So that left—

Nut. Tui. And—

"We're just missing William," Hong said, the sentence pulling Est out of his calculations and back into the present, back into the table and the drinks and the people who were real and present rather than hypothetical.

William.

The name that had appeared in the threads—present, mentioned, but not yet seen, not yet resolved into a person rather than a possibility.

At midnight, Lego's feet stopped moving.

He had been swinging them—the platform boots hovering in the air beneath the too-high chair, the motion constant throughout the conversation, through the drinks, through the laughter, the boots keeping time with a rhythm that only Lego could hear, some internal metronome that governed his body's movements the way it governed his performances.

Now the swinging stopped.

Lego stared at his phone. The screen illuminating his face—the white light harsh against the pink and red ambient glow, the contrast making his features sharper, the worry visible.

"He's running late," Lego said. His voice had changed—the brightness dimmed, the musical quality flattened, the worry replacing the warmth. He was looking at his phone—not Hong's phone anymore, but his own, the screen glowing with an empty conversation thread, messages sent but not answered. "He's not answering."

"William runs late to everything," Nut said. His voice was calm. Steady. The voice of a person who had experience with William's lateness and had learned not to interpret it as abandonment, who understood that some people operated on different temporal systems and that the lateness was not a statement but a symptom. "He'll be here."

"He said he would come," Lego said. The brightness in his voice had dimmed further—not extinguished, never extinguished, but reduced. "He promised."

"William keeps his promises," Tui said, his voice carrying the specific, patient reassurance of a person who knew William well enough to predict his patterns. "He's just—"

"Bad at time?" Hong suggested.

"Distracted," Tui corrected. "He gets focused on things. Forgets to look at the clock. Time stops being a thing that matters when he's behind a lens."

Lego's feet resumed their movement—the platform boots swinging in the air again, but the motion was different now, faster, more agitated, the fidgeting visible, the waiting uncomfortable, the worry manifesting in the body because the body was where Lego stored his feelings when his mouth couldn't hold them anymore.

"P'Will isn't saying anything," Lego sighed, looking at his phone again, the screen

still showing no new messages, the conversation thread frozen at the last thing Lego had sent—probably something bright, something encouraging, something that ended with multiple exclamation points because that was how Lego texted. "I texted him three times."

Nut reached over and placed a hand on Lego's arm—large hand, small arm, the touch gentle, grounding, the specific, protective gesture of a person who knew how to comfort without overwhelming, who understood that sometimes the best thing you could do for someone was just touch them, remind them that they were not alone in their worry, that the worry was being held by more than one person.

"Maybe his phone died," Tui offered, his voice gentle—the specific, calibrated gentleness that Tui deployed when Lego was upset, the careful adjustment of tone that said I see what you're feeling and I'm not going to minimize it but I am going to offer an alternative explanation that might help.

"His phone never dies," Lego said, the statement delivered with the certainty of someone who had observed William's phone-charging habits extensively. "He charges it like it's a pet. He has a portable charger in every bag."

"Maybe he's on the way and doesn't want to text while driving."

"He doesn't drive. He takes the BTS."

"Maybe the BTS doesn't have signal."

"P'Tui." Lego looked at him. The enormous eyes wet—not crying, not yet, but the surface tension of tears that were being held by discipline. "Stop trying to fix it. He's ignoring me."

"He's not ignoring you," Tui said firmly. "William doesn't ignore people. He just—" A pause. A search for the right word. "—disappears sometimes. Into his own head. It's not personal."

"It feels personal," Lego said quietly.

"I know, Sweetheart." Nut's hand was still on Lego's arm, the touch constant. "But I promise you, it's not. William loves you. He's just—William."

"He'll probably arrive before you go on stage," Nut continued, his voice carrying the specific, certain reassurance of a person who was choosing to believe something because the believing would help. "And when he sees you up there—when he sees you writing something in the air with your body—he's going to forget that he was late. He's going to remember why he came."

"What if he doesn't see it?" Lego's voice was very small now, the worry concentrated into a whisper.

"Then he'll see the photos," Tui said, lifting his camera slightly, the gesture both practical and symbolic. "I'm getting every angle. Every moment. He won't miss anything."

"That's not the same," Lego said.

"It's not," Tui agreed. "But it's something. It's evidence that you were amazing. He can look at the evidence later and feel appropriately guilty for missing the live version."

Lego's mouth twitched—not quite a smile, but the foundation of one, the small crack in the worry where light could enter.

"Lego's anger has a forty-eight-hour fuse," Nut observed, his tone lighter now, the heaviness lifting slightly. "He'll be sweet tonight. He'll be disappointed tomorrow. He'll be demanding an explanation by Monday."

"You know his anger schedule?" Est asked, the question genuine, the curiosity real.

"I know everyone's anger schedule," Nut said, his face completely serious. "It's a survival skill. Lego's anger is delayed but intense. Hong's anger is immediate but brief. Tui's anger is quiet and lasts for years."

"That's terrifyingly accurate," Hong said.

"I pay attention," Nut said simply.

The minutes passed. Lego checked his phone periodically—the checking becoming a rhythm, a compulsion, the same way Est checked his own phone for comments he didn't want to read. No messages from William. The thread remained frozen.

Est watched the exchange. Watched the way they supported each other—the touches, the words, the specific, practiced, clearly-established patterns of care that said this is how we do this. This is how we hold each other.

He wanted to be part of this. He wanted to learn the patterns. He wanted to be held the way they were holding Lego—not because he was fragile, but because being held was not weakness. Being held was trust.

At 12:30, Lego stood.

The movement was decisive—the transition from sitting to standing performed with the specific, deliberate energy of a person who had made a decision and was now executing it, the worry being set aside so the work could be picked up.

"I have to go get ready," he said. The platform boots on the floor now, the full height restored. The worry was still visible in his face—in the slight tightness around his

eyes, in the way his fingers moved against each other, restless, seeking something to hold—but he was pushing it aside, filing it in whatever internal storage space performers used for personal feelings when professional obligations arrived.

"You're going to be incredible," Hong said, his voice lacking its usual sarcasm, the sincerity naked, undefended.

"I know," Lego said, the brightness returning slightly, the confidence not arrogance but fact. "I'm always incredible. I'm just also worried."

"You can be both," Nut said. "You usually are."

"If P'Will shows up—" Lego started, his voice catching slightly on the name.

"We'll send him to the front," Tui interrupted, his voice firm, the promise clear. "Best view in the house. I promise."

"And tell him I'm angry."

"You're not angry," Nut said gently.

"Tell him I'm disappointed." Lego's eyes were enormous, the contact lenses amplifying every emotion. "That's worse."

"Noted," Tui said, his mouth twitching into an almost-smile.

Lego leaned down and hugged Nut—quickly, fiercely, the hug of a person who needed grounding before launching into the air. Then he turned and disappeared into the crowd, moving toward whatever backstage area existed in this venue, the red ribbons in his hair trailing behind him like small, determined flags.

The four of them remained at the table.

Hong. Nut. Tui. Est.

The table was quieter without Lego—the specific, noticeable, Lego-shaped absence, the energy that his presence had been contributing now missing, the group's voltage dropping slightly, the way a room dimmed when a particularly bright light was turned off.

"He'll be okay," Nut said, though it was unclear whether he was reassuring the table or himself.

The sentence sat on the table—honest, precise, the kind of observation that was both accurate and kind, that named the thing without diminishing it.

"Come on," Hong said, standing, the movement pulling the table's attention with him. "Better view from the balcony. And I want to see Nut have his weekly heart attack when Lego does the drop."

"I don't have heart attacks," Nut said, standing as well, his large frame unfolding from the chair.

"You stop breathing."

"That's different."

They moved closer to the railing—the four of them in a row, looking down at the stage below, the vantage point perfect, the view unobstructed.

Tui positioned his camera—checking settings, adjusting the lens, the practiced movements of a person preparing to capture something important. Hong leaned against the railing with studied casualness, his arms folded, his posture relaxed but his eyes focused. Nut stood steady, solid, the anchor—hands gripping the railing lightly, the body still but the attention complete.

Est stood beside Nut. Close enough that their arms touched—accidentally, the proximity of shared railing space, the contact unavoidable in a venue where everyone was pressed together by circumstance and choice.

Nut didn't move away. Est didn't move away.

The contact was—neutral. Unremarkable. The kind of contact that happened between people who were standing close together at a crowded event. Arm against arm. Fabric against fabric. The warmth of another person's presence, registered by the skin, filed by the brain as proximity rather than meaning. But Est's brain was not filing it as neutral.

Est's brain was running calculations.

Is it him?

The thought arrived unbidden, settling into his consciousness with the weight of a question that demanded answering. The arm touching his—was it the same arm that had held him? The body standing beside him—was it the same body that had been in his bed, that had asked permission, that had traced the edges of his unfinished tattoo with fingers that were careful and attentive and impossibly gentle?

He couldn't tell.

The touch communicated nothing specific. The touch was just touch—the physical fact of two surfaces meeting, the heat transfer between bodies, the ordinary miracle of skin recognizing skin without knowing whose skin it was recognizing.

Est felt more confused than ever.

Three possibilities remained. Nut, whose arm was currently touching his. Tui, who stood two feet away with his camera. William, who was absent but expected, whose

name appeared in every conversation but whose face Est had not yet seen.

One of them was the answer. One of them had been in his apartment, in his bed, in his arms. One of them was the person whose face he had been trying to resolve for a week, the person who existed in his memory as sensation without image, as voice without face, as the most important thing that had happened to him in years and the one thing he couldn't fully remember.

The DJ's music faded.

The lights dimmed—not to darkness, but to a softer glow, the red and pink deepening to rose and crimson, the colors saturating, the venue's temperature changing, the atmosphere shifting from party to performance, from chaos to ceremony. The crowd below went quiet—the specific, anticipatory quiet of an audience that knew something was about to begin, that had come here for this moment, that was ready to witness.

A spotlight cut through the darkness—sharp, white, precise, angling upward toward the ceiling like a searchlight looking for God. And there, illuminated in the circle of light, was the aerial apparatus.

Est had not noticed it before—had not looked up during the drinking and the talking, had not seen the rigging that must have been installed hours ago, the structural engineering that made the performance possible, the bolts and cables and load-bearing calculations that separated art from catastrophe.

Now he saw: a giant aerial dance stand, professional-grade, positioned at the center of the venue's high ceiling. The metal framework was substantial—industrial, serious, the kind of equipment that was designed not for aesthetics but for safety, for the specific, non-negotiable purpose of holding human weight at dangerous heights. Hanging from the framework: an aerial lyra—the metal hoop that aerialists used, suspended by cables, the hoop currently occupied.

And below that, flowing downward like water frozen mid-fall: red acrobatic fabric. Pink and red silks, matching the venue's Valentine's theme, the fabric hanging in long, graceful loops, the material catching the spotlight and glowing like something alive.

On the lyra, positioned at the top of the apparatus, was a performer—a girl in white clothes, wings attached to her back, the angel imagery completing the Valentine's theme, the costume ethereal, the figure small against the vastness of the ceiling. She was beautiful. She was impressive. She was not Lego.

Below her, wrapped in the red fabric like a gift being unwrapped in reverse, was Lego.

The transformation was complete.

Not the worried Lego from the table. Not the Lego who had been checking his phone and swinging his platform boots and asking if William was coming. This was performance Lego—the Lego who climbed into the air and wrote with his body, the Lego who used danger as language, the Lego who had spent years learning to trust fabric and physics and the specific, terrifying, beautiful act of letting go.

The costume was black—but not plain black, not the solid, covering, uniform black of Est's shirt or the simple black of ordinary clothing. This black was textured. Ribbons everywhere—sewn into the fabric, trailing from the sleeves, attached to the waist, the ribbons moving even when Lego was still, creating the impression of motion even in stillness. Sheer fabric that caught the spotlight and became translucent, revealing skin beneath, the body visible and concealed simultaneously.

Silver hearts sewn into the costume, catching the light like tiny mirrors, the hearts scattered across the fabric in a pattern that looked random but was probably deliberate. Lace details at the collar, at the wrists, the lace delicate against the dramatic black. Bracelets on both wrists—multiple, layered, some metal, some lace. A necklace—simple, silver, visible against his pale skin. And—Est's eyes caught it—a lace garter belt visible on one thigh, the intimate garment repurposed as performance wear, the personal made public, the boundary between private and theatrical deliberately erased.

His jet-black hair hung loose—longer than it had been at the table, released from the half-ponytails, falling past his shoulders, the strands moving with every shift of his body. His porcelain skin glowed in the spotlight—luminous, almost unnatural, the skin of a person who had been designed for stages rather than streets. His piercings caught the light—the septum ring, the earrings, each small piece of metal a tiny star in the constellation of his face.

The makeup was different now—heavier, more theatrical, the eyes even more enormous, the definition sharper, the face painted not for close observation but for distance, for the people in the back row, for the cameras that would capture this and distribute it to the million-plus followers who would watch and like and comment and share.

The whole composition was elaborate, beautiful, and utterly, unapologetically Lego.

The music began.

Est had never seen aerial work performed live. He had seen videos—clips on social media, the digital versions of a physical art, the thirty-second Instagram reels that showed the highlights without the context, the drops without the climbs, the catches without the falls. But the digital versions had not prepared him for this. For the physicality of it. For the sound of it—the fabric moving, the friction of silk against skin, the breathing audible even over the music, the small grunts of effort when Lego adjusted his grip or repositioned his body.

For the danger of it.

Every drop was a controlled fall. Lego climbed—wrapping the fabric around his body, his legs, his arms, creating friction points, creating holds—and then he released. He let go. He fell.

And caught himself.

Fell again. Caught himself again.

The whole performance was a conversation between gravity and defiance, between the earth that wanted him and the silk that held him, between the ground that he refused to obey and the air that he had claimed as his territory.

The crowd below gasped. Applauded. Gasped again.

Est gripped the railing. His knuckles white. His breathing shallow.

This, he thought, is what it looks like to use your body to tell the truth.

This was the gap. This was the difference between what he did and what Lego did. Est used his body to tell lies—the cold-distant-unattainable lie, the perfect-and-empty lie, the marble-Prince lie, the narrative that the industry required and that he provided with mechanical precision because providing it was his job and his job was his identity and his identity was the only thing he had left after Maryland and his parents and the house that smelled of nothing.

Lego used his body to tell the truth. The truth that your body was not a surface but a story, that the marks you carried and the movements you made and the risks you took were all sentences in a narrative you were writing with flesh and bone and the specific, terrifying, beautiful act of being alive.

"William!"

Hong's shout pulled Est out of his reverie—out of the philosophical space he'd been occupying, out of the abstract contemplation of bodies and truth, back into the specific, immediate, physical reality of the venue and the performance and the people around him. Hong was pointing down—not at the stage, not at Lego, but at the crowd below them, at the floor level, at a spot near the front where the audience pressed against the stage barriers.

"Finally!" Hong was waving his hands, trying to get someone's attention, the gesture large, theatrical, the kind of wave you deployed when you needed to be seen across a distance and through a crowd.

Est looked.

And there—in the crowd, camera raised, photographing the performance with the

focused intensity of a person who was seeing something—

William.

Est's age, maybe younger. Dark hair. Earth-toned clothes—a cream sweater, tan pants, the specific, neutral, blending-in aesthetic of a person who dressed to disappear rather than to be seen. A camera around his neck—a different camera than the one currently in his hands, a vintage-looking thing that hung beside his chest while he shot with something more professional.

William. The name attached itself to the face. William was photographing Lego. The camera was pointed at the silks, at the falling body, at the dangerous catches. The concentration on his face was—complete. The focus of a person who was seeing something and trying to capture it.

"At least he made it to the show," Hong said, his voice carrying relief and exasperation in equal measure. "Lego's going to kill him for not answering his phone."

"He'll be relieved first," Tui said, his own camera up now, shooting from the balcony angle, capturing what William was capturing from a different perspective, the two photographers creating parallel testimonies to the same event. "The killing will come later."

"Lego's anger has a forty-eight-hour fuse," Nut observed. "He'll be sweet tonight. He'll be disappointed tomorrow. He'll be demanding an explanation by Monday."

"You really do know everyone's anger schedule." Est said.

"I told you. Survival skill."

"He's photographing," Tui said, his eye to his own viewfinder. "When William photographs, he forgets everything else."

"He forgets his phone exists," Hong added.

"He forgets time exists."

"He forgets that worried friends exist."

"He's an artist," Nut said, his voice calm, the voice of a person stating a fact rather than making an excuse. "Artists get lost in the work. It's not personal. It's just—how they're built."

Est watched William watching Lego.

William stood in the crowd with his camera raised, and Est could see—even from this distance, even in the red-pink lighting that distorted colors and flattened depths, even through the haze of his own confusion and the week-long mystery that

had lived in his chest like a second heartbeat—that William was seeing something real.

Not the performance as spectacle. Not the costume or the lighting or the commercial, shareable, Instagram-ready elements of what was happening. William was seeing Lego—seeing the person using their body to tell the truth, seeing the risk and the trust and the specific, beautiful, terrifying act of letting go and catching yourself.

He sees it, Est thought. He sees what I see.

He sees the truth underneath the performance.

He sees people.

And Est had eliminated Lego—the height was wrong, the geometry impossible. He had eliminated Hong—the tattoo was wrong, the peony in the wrong location. That left three possibilities.

Nut, whose arm was currently not touching his anymore because they'd both shifted slightly during the performance, whose back was covered by a sweatshirt, whose tattoos were invisible, whose story was hidden.

Tui, who stood with his camera, whose button-down shirt concealed his torso, whose focus was currently on capturing rather than being captured, whose past was a mystery Est hadn't begun to investigate.

William, who was below them in the crowd, whose attention was complete, whose hands were holding a camera instead of tracing tattoos, whose body was present but inaccessible, whose story was written somewhere Est couldn't read it.

Three people. One of them had been in his bed. One of them had asked is everything alright? and had meant it. One of them was the answer to the question that had been living in his body for a week: Who?

The performance continued below. Lego fell and caught himself. The crowd gasped. The music swelled. The silks held.

And Est stood on the balcony, gripping the railing that he'd released at some point during his observations, trying to solve a mystery with incomplete information, trying to find a face in a crowd, trying to identify the person who had seen him—really seen him, the way William was seeing Lego—and had chosen to stay anyway, if only for a night.

Three possibilities. One answer.

The night was just beginning.

He didn't know which one.

But he was going to find out.

He left the party at three in the morning.

The venue was still alive—the music still pulsing, the red and pink lights still saturating everything, the crowd still moving to rhythms that would continue until sunrise or until the police arrived or until the collective energy finally depleted and people remembered that Monday existed and jobs existed and the real world was waiting outside the Valentine's bubble with its arms crossed and its expectations ready.

But Est had reached his limit. The social battery that Dana had once joked about, the internal reservoir that introverts drew from when they were around people, the resource that was finite and that Est had been spending all night and that was now, at three AM, completely drained.

He found Hong at the bar.

Hong was talking to a group of people Est didn't recognize—His gray hair caught the lights, the color shifting with each movement. His silver rings glinted as he gestured, the hands moving, the body language open, the sarcasm temporarily suspended because Hong was in his element, surrounded by people who understood his language.

"I'm leaving," Est said, approaching from the side, not interrupting the conversation but inserting himself into it, the social maneuver that he'd learned from years of industry events where timing was everything.

Hong turned. The sarcasm that usually lived in his expression was absent—replaced by something softer, something that might have been understanding or might have been exhaustion or might have been the specific, 3-AM vulnerability that happened when people had been awake too long and the armor got too heavy to hold up.

"You lasted longer than I expected," Hong said.

"Is that a compliment?"

"It's an observation. Compliments cost extra."

"How much extra?"

"More than you can afford, Prince."

"Stop calling me that."

Hong reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone—the same phone Lego had been holding earlier, returned at some point during the evening.

"You have my number," Hong said. "Use it."

"I will."

Hong looked at him. The look was brief but complete—the assessment, the decision, the choice to believe or not believe, the small gamble that every friendship required.

"Okay," Hong said. "I'm choosing to trust you. Don't make me regret it."

"I'll try not to."

"Trying is insufficient. Do not to."

"Noted."

Hong's expression shifted—the sarcasm returning, but warmer now, the edge softened. "Get home safe, Prince."

"I told you—"

"I know what you told me. I'm ignoring it. It's what I do."

Est left.

The cold air outside hit his face—welcome, sharp, the antidote to the venue's heat and noise and the accumulated humidity of three hundred bodies breathing and sweating and dancing in an enclosed space for five hours. He ordered a Grab. The app glowed in his hand—the little car icon moving toward his location on the map.

He sat in the back seat when the car arrived and watched Bangkok pass by his window.

The city was still celebrating Valentine's Day even though Valentine's Day was technically over—the decorations still glowing, the red and pink hearts still illuminated, the mechanical infrastructure of commercial romance still running even though the audience had mostly gone home, the love performed for an empty theater.

He thought about the party.

About Lego's performance—the falling, the catching, the body telling truths that words couldn't capture, the specific, beautiful, terrifying act of using danger as language and trust as grammar.

About William photographing in the crowd—focused, intense, seeing something real

and trying to preserve it, the camera an extension of his vision, the vision an extension of his care.

About Nut's steady presence at the table, the arm that had touched his (accidentally, meaninglessly, the ordinary contact of two people standing close), the question that remained unanswered.

About Tui's warmth, his photography, the way he'd promised to send William to the front, the way he'd kept his camera ready to capture every angle so William wouldn't miss anything.

About Hong's sarcasm and his martini-ordering and his get home safe and his choice to trust.

He thought about the boy.

He had not found the boy tonight. He had not solved the mystery. He had spent the evening watching and wondering and eliminating possibilities, and he had ended the night with the same question he had started with: Who?

But he had also—

He had also had a good time.

The realization arrived quietly, settling into his chest with the weight of something simple and true. The party had been loud and overwhelming and completely unlike the controlled, professional events he was used to—the galas and the launches and the brand activations where everything was choreographed and everyone was performing and the networking was the point and the enjoyment was incidental.

But it had also been real. The people had been real. The conversations had been real. The laughter had been real—not the polite, obligatory laughter of people who were laughing because laughing was expected, but the genuine, involuntary, happens-before-you-can-stop-it laughter of people who found something actually funny.

He had been part of something. For a few hours. Not the center—never the center, that wasn't who he was, wasn't what he wanted—but part of it. Included. Welcomed. Held by a group that had made space for him at their table and had given him a bracelet and a dirty martini and the specific, rare gift of being seen as a person rather than a product.

He had belonged. Temporarily. Incompletely. But belonged.

And he wanted—

He wanted to stay.

But life went on.

Life always went on—the calendar didn't pause for revelations, the industry didn't close for personal growth, the machine kept running whether you were inside it or watching it from a balcony with a dirty martini and a growing sense that maybe, possibly, the machine was not the only option.

The Grab pulled up to his building. He thanked the driver. He rode the elevator to his floor. He entered his apartment—the soundproofed, climate-controlled, perfume-shelf-equipped space that was his and his alone, the fortress he had built against the world.

He took off his jacket. His rings. His watch. The ear cuff. He placed them on the counter—not carelessly, but deliberately, each object in its designated spot, the order maintained because order was what kept the chaos at bay.

He went to bed. He slept.

He dreamed about a back he couldn't see—an unfinished tattoo, lines that were present and lines that were absent, a story being written on skin that was warm and alive beneath hands that asked permission, that traced carefully, that saw him and stayed anyway. When he woke on Sunday, the dream lingered. The face still wouldn't resolve. But the feeling remained—the warmth, the attention, the being seen.

Monday, he thought. Monday I'll figure it out.

Monday meant work. Monday meant the machine. Monday meant the weekend's revelations had to be filed away—not forgotten, never forgotten, but compartmentalized, stored in the mental space labeled personal so the mental space labeled professional could be accessed and utilized and performed with the efficiency that the industry required. Dana arrived at his apartment mid-morning with her tablet, her notebook, and the composure that she wore like other people wore cologne—pervasive, intentional, the invisible armor that made her effective.

She looked around the apartment as she entered—the dark living room, the perfume shelf glinting in the morning light, the kitchen where Est was already making coffee because making coffee was how he started days when the days felt heavy.

"Usually I'd make you come to the office for this," Dana said, settling onto the sofa with the easy familiarity of a person who had been in this space before, who had earned the right to exist in Est's private environment without performing guest-ness. "But it's more comfortable here. And you look like you need comfortable today."

Est set two cups on the counter. The espresso machine hummed—the sound mechanical, precise, the same sound every morning, the reliability of technology that did what it was designed to do without complaint or variation.

"I still haven't gotten used to it," Est said, carrying the cups to the living area, handing one to Dana, settling into the chair across from her. "The building. The agency. It's huge and there are eyes everywhere. It feels like they're waiting for me to mess up."

"They're not waiting for you to mess up," Dana said, accepting the cup, the steam rising between them. "They're waiting for you to be interesting. In this industry, those are the same thing."

"That's comforting."

"It's not meant to be comforting. It's meant to be accurate." Dana sipped her coffee, her eyes closing briefly in appreciation. "You make good coffee, Est. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"You have. Repeatedly."

"Because it's true and truth deserves repetition."

Dana opened her tablet—the screen glowing, the interface familiar, the digital workspace where contracts and campaigns and the business of being a product were managed and negotiated and optimized.

"There's a new contract," she said, her voice shifting into professional mode, the warmth remaining but the focus sharpening. "Adidas. Sportswear line. They want to work with you again."

"But?" Est said, because there was always a but, because contracts that were simple didn't require in-person meetings in his apartment on a Monday morning.

"But one of the other models is Hong."

The name sat in the space between them—not heavy, not light, just present, the word carrying weight without announcing it.

Hong.

"They saw the Valentine's campaign numbers," Dana continued, scrolling through something on her tablet, her face neutral, professional, the face she used when she was presenting information without editorializing. "The engagement was significant. The 'Prince and Rebel' narrative is performing well—not just on social media but in actual consumer metrics. People are talking about you two. And when people talk, brands listen."

"So they want to use the views."

"They want to capitalize on organic engagement. Which is a nice way of saying: yes, they want to use the views." Dana looked up from her tablet, her eyes finding his. "I wouldn't normally push for another paired campaign this soon. The risk of overexposure is real. But the numbers are—"

"Good?"

"Exceptional. This kind of performance doesn't go unnoticed. And the Adidas offer is solid—good money, good creative team, good timeline. It's not exploitative. It's strategic."

Est picked up his phone from the coffee table. The screen showed his social media—the follower count visible in the top right corner, the number climbing daily, the metric that mattered more than talent or craft or any of the things he wished mattered more than metrics.

He scrolled through his feed. Saw a picture.

Lego and Hong. Judging by their clothes—Lego's red ribbons, Hong's sleeveless shirt with the black star—the photo was from Saturday night, from the party, from the world that existed outside this apartment and this meeting and this decision. The two of them side by side. Lego's arm around Hong's waist. Hong's expression flat but his eyes carrying something that the flat expression denied—warmth, affection, the specific, reluctant love of a person who pretended not to care and cared desperately.

Est realized something: he followed Lego now. The action had happened at some point over the weekend—a deliberate choice made in a moment he didn't fully remember but that felt right, that felt like a small, meaningful step toward connection.

The choice to connect, publicly, with a person from the warehouse. The choice to ignore the voice in the back of his mind that sounded like the comments, like the internet, like the chorus of strangers who had opinions about his choices and who expressed those opinions with the confidence of people who believed that public figures were public property.

He had followed Lego. And now Est's feed contained not just the commercial perfection of brand accounts and industry contacts but also—this. Warmth. Friendship. Evidence that people existed in relationships rather than in narratives.

"I'll do it," Est said, looking up from his phone, meeting Dana's eyes.

Dana's expression didn't change dramatically—she was too professional for dramatic expressions—but something shifted. A small softening around the eyes.

The micro-expression that was pride, or relief, or the specific satisfaction of a manager who had presented options and whose client had chosen the good one.

"Good," Dana said. "The shoot is next week. Thursday. Studio on the east side. Hong's manager has already confirmed his availability."

"P'Kwan?" Est said, the name carrying weight, carrying history, carrying the memory of the conference room and the yelling and the word liability used to describe a person who was not a liability but a human.

"Yes. She's—" Dana paused, choosing her words with the precision of a person who understood that words about other people's managers were political territory. "Less hostile than she was at our last meeting. The campaign numbers helped. Numbers always help."

"They do. Unfortunately."

"Unfortunately," Dana agreed. "I wish craft mattered more than metrics. But we work in an industry that measures success in likes and shares, not in artistic merit. So we use the metrics. We use them strategically. And we hope that the strategy creates space for the craft to exist inside."

She took another sip of coffee. Set the cup down.

"I'll send you the details this afternoon. Mood boards, creative brief, the usual. And Est?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're doing this. Not because of the views or the numbers or any of that." She paused. "Because you're choosing it. That's different from accepting it. And choosing is better."

The sentence landed in Est's chest—settled there, took root, became the kind of thing that would grow if given time and attention and the specific, careful nurturing that important truths required.

Choosing was better than accepting.

He had been accepting for six years. Accepting the bookings. Accepting the direction. Accepting the turtlenecks and the cologne and the robotic-Prince narrative and the emptiness that came from being a surface without a person, a product without a story.

But he had chosen to go to the warehouse. He had chosen to follow Hong's number into his phone. He had chosen to wear the reddish-brown jacket and the ear cuff and to leave the headphones on the marble pedestal. He had chosen to stay at the table when the staying was uncomfortable, to drink the lukewarm martini, to watch

Lego fall and catch himself.

He had chosen. And the choosing had led to—To this. To Monday morning coffee with Dana. To a new contract that was strategic but not exploitative. To a social media feed that contained warmth instead of just metrics. To a slow, tentative, brick-by-brick construction of a life that was not just survived but lived.

They went to the agency together.

The building—the thirty floors of glass and steel and marble, the badge-beep at security, the elevator bank that smelled of expensive cleaning products and other people's ambition.

Est signed the contract in a conference room on the fourteenth floor. The pen moved across the page, the ink making the mark that was legally binding and professionally consequential and personally meaningful in ways the legal language couldn't capture.

His name. His signature. The specific, practiced, identical-every-time version of his handwriting that he'd developed for signing contracts and autographs and the thousand small documents that being a product required.

He signed and he felt—

Not the usual nothing. Not the mechanical, transaction-completed flatness that signing contracts had always produced, the emptiness of an action performed without investment, the going-through-motions that characterized so much of his professional life.

He felt something.

The something was small—a pulse, a warmth, the specific, physical, barely-perceptible sensation of a person who was doing something because they had chosen to do it rather than because they had been told to, because the doing was strategic and meaningful and connected to people he cared about rather than just brands he represented.

When it was done, Dana had meetings. Other clients, other contracts, the continuous, never-ending machinery of management that required her to be in four places simultaneously and that she navigated with the calm efficiency of a person who had learned to exist in multiple spaces without fragmenting

Dana left for her meeting on the seventh floor. Est took the elevator down.

The cafeteria was on the first floor.

The Thai café—the lemongrass iced tea and the pad krapao, the space that was technically for agency employees but that was open to the public, that existed in the liminal zone between corporate and casual, that smelled of basil and fish sauce and the specific, comforting, this-is-home smell of Thai food cooked by people who understood that food was more than fuel.

He walked through the cafeteria's glass doors, intending to get tea, intending to sit for a few minutes before returning to his apartment, intending to transition from the professional mode back into the personal mode, to shed the conference room and reclaim the self.

And on one of the sofas near the window—Lego.

Lego in the agency building was a study in contradictions. The building was corporate—glass and marble and the specific, institutional, we-take-ourselves-seriously aesthetic of a place that produced content and consumed careers and measured success in metrics rather than meaning.

Lego was not corporate.

Lego was sitting on a sofa that was designed for brief, uncomfortable sitting—the kind of furniture that discouraged lingering, that was meant for waiting rather than staying. But Lego had made it his own. His legs were crossed beneath him—not the polite, knees-together crossing that the corporate world preferred but the full, comfortable, sitting-on-the-floor-but-elevated-by-furniture crossing of a person whose body was flexible and who used that flexibility unconsciously.

Beside him on the sofa: a black Miu Miu bag. The bag was expensive—the brand visible in the subtle, the leather quality evident even from across the room. Hanging from the bag's handle was a brown rabbit plushie wearing pink ribbons and matching pink clothes—the plushie serving as a bag charm, the decorative element that transformed a thousand-dollar accessory into a personal artifact, the touch that said yes this is expensive but it's also mine and I love it and I will decorate it however I want.

Lego himself was—Casual. More casual than Est had seen him. The makeup was minimal—so minimal that Est's first thought was no makeup, but then he looked closer and saw: very thin, very natural foundation. A slight enhancement of the lashes. The barest suggestion of color on the lips. The makeup of a person who was not performing today but who still understood that his face was a surface that could be curated.

No contact lenses—the eyes were brown today, dark, honest, the natural color that was less striking than the gold-silver lenses but somehow more Lego, more the person underneath the performance.

He was playing with his tongue piercing—the small metal ball moving between his

teeth and lips, the restless, unconscious movement that Lego made with his mouth the way other people made with their hands, the fidget that was both nervous habit and constant presence.

White Adidas sneakers—the classic Originals with the three black stripes, but Lego being Lego, the laces had been replaced with white ribbons tied in bows, the functional replaced with the decorative, the ordinary transformed into the personal.

White socks. Adidas shorts—black, simple, the athletic wear that was either very expensive or very cheap depending on whether you cared about branding. An oversized black t-shirt that fell off one shoulder, revealing underneath a lace-up tank top, the layering creating depth, different fabrics creating texture, the combination simultaneously casual and deliberate.

His hair was loose—the long black curtain falling below his shoulders, but with a few small braids scattered throughout, irregular, playful, the braids the kind of detail that suggested either boredom or intention or both.

In his hands: his phone. His thumbs moving across the screen—scrolling, typing, the digital native's unconscious fluency with the device that was extension of self.

Est stood at the cafeteria entrance and observed him.

And then the thought arrived.

Not asked for. Not wanted. But there, persistent, the strategic part of his brain activating without permission: Lego is the easiest.

The thought was ugly. The thought was accurate. Lego talks. Lego trusts. Lego will answer questions without suspecting ulterior motives. Lego knows who was at the party that night. Lego knows who left with whom. Lego could tell you—if you asked the right way, if you approached from the right angle, if you used his trust against him—who was in your bed.

The thought was followed immediately by guilt. Thick, viscous, the guilt of a person who had been given warmth and was considering using it as tool, who had been welcomed and was calculating how to exploit the welcome.

Lego had held his hand at the party. Lego had given him a bracelet—a literal, physical token of inclusion, a you belong here made fabric. Lego had climbed into the air and had been beautiful and had dedicated the performance in part to the people watching, to the newcomer who had shown up in a reddish-brown jacket and had looked lost and had been found.

And Est was thinking about how to use him.

The thought made him feel exactly like the thing the internet said he was: cold, calculating, robotic, empty, the Prince who valued strategy over people, who saw

humans as means rather than ends.

He hated it.

He hated that the thought had arrived. He hated that his brain had automatically gone there, had identified Lego's trust as vulnerability and vulnerability as opportunity. He hated that six years in an industry that traded in surfaces had trained him to see people as resources, relationships as transactions, warmth as something to be converted into advantage.

But the thought had arrived. And now he had to decide what to do with it.

He could leave. He could turn around, exit the cafeteria, return to his apartment, text Lego later with some casual greeting that didn't require proximity or eye contact or the risk of his strategic, ugly, exploitation-seeking brain winning the argument against his better self.

Or—

Or he could approach. Not strategically. Not with questions about that night or that person or the mystery that lived in his chest. But honestly. As a person who was happy to see another person. As someone who wanted connection without agenda, who wanted to sit on an uncomfortable corporate sofa and talk about nothing important and build the kind of relationship that was not useful but was real.

He approached.